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Information Paper

Labour Force Survey Questionnaire Redesign

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Labour Force Survey Questionnaire Redesign

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CONTENTS

	Page
BACKGROUND	
Introduction	1
The need for change	1
Constraints	1
The questionnaire development	2
The statistical impact study and implementation of the new questionnaire	2
CHANGES TO CORE DATA SERIES	
Introduction	4
Future starters	4
Contributing family workers away from work	5
Unavailable to start work due to temporary illness	5
Short term unpaid leave initiated by the employer	6
CHANGES TO NON-CORE DATA SERIES	
Introduction	7
Last job details	7
Status in employment	7
Underemployment	8
ADDITIONAL DATA	
Introduction	9
Job tenure	9
Marginal attachment	9
Underemployment	9
Hours worked	10
Multiple jobholders	10
Duration of unemployment	10
THE LFS DURING THE SIS	
Introduction	11
Imputed question responses during the SIS	11
Publication changes	11
FURTHER INFORMATION	13

BACKGROUND

Introduction

1 The Labour Force Survey (LFS) questionnaire is currently being redesigned for the first time since the inception of the monthly survey in February 1978. The redesigned questionnaire is scheduled for implementation in March and April 2001. This information paper has been prepared to provide users of labour force statistics with information about the redesigned LFS questionnaire and the strategies for testing, evaluating and implementing it.

2 The first section of the paper provides some background information about the questionnaire redesign including a brief discussion of why the questionnaire is being changed. It then goes on to discuss details of the changes that are proposed for the LFS questionnaire and the expected impact of these changes. Changes to core data series, changes to non-core series, and additional data items that will be available from the new questionnaire are discussed separately. Finally the paper provides some details about the forthcoming statistical impact study (SIS) of the redesigned questionnaire to be conducted from March to July 2000, and the implications this will have for the current LFS.

The need for change

3 The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has been conducting the LFS since 1960. The survey was undertaken on a quarterly basis before February 1978 and has been monthly since then. The current questionnaire has been in place, with only minor changes, since the inception of the monthly survey. While the current questionnaire continues to provide a wide range of relevant labour force information, in recent years a need has emerged to update the questionnaire to better reflect current labour market phenomena and contemporary user needs. In view of the considerable changes and restructuring in the Australian labour market, the ABS has concluded that a redesign of the survey questionnaire is warranted.

4 The redesigned LFS questionnaire will provide additional and more relevant data reflecting contemporary labour market characteristics as well as reflecting developments in international standards and practices for collecting labour force statistics. The new questionnaire is also designed to enhance the quality of the data collected through an improved format and updated question wording. The quality and stability of the data will also benefit from some minor definitional changes enabling a more precise application of survey concepts.

Constraints

5 The redesign of the LFS questionnaire was undertaken within an overriding constraint of maintaining the continuity of time series for key labour force variables (that is, employed, unemployed and not in the labour force). The statistical impact of the new questionnaire will be evaluated prior to its implementation to ensure this constraint has been met.

Constraints *continued*

6 In this context, some minor definitional changes will be made to core data items to enhance the quality of Australia's labour force statistics and to better align survey concepts with international guidelines. While this will cause some minor breaks in series, each of the changes will be either directly measurable in the new questionnaire, or quantifiable on the basis of historical data so that it will be possible to form a consistent time series over the break.

7 Breaks in non-core data series will also be minimised. Where new data series are being produced, current series will, in most cases, continue to be available if a user requirement exists. Changes have only been made where it was necessary to improve the quality of the data obtained by the survey questions. In some cases, question wording for non-core data items has been updated to reflect contemporary terminology or labour market conditions. In other cases, the question wording has been adjusted to improve the flow of the questionnaire or respondent understanding of the questions being asked. In most cases the underlying concept being measured by these questions has not changed and the ABS is confident that any effect on the data will be negligible.

The questionnaire development

8 The redesign of the LFS questionnaire has been proceeding for a number of years. As part of this, the ABS consulted widely with users of labour force statistics to assess their data requirements. Strong support was given to changes in the questionnaire design that would achieve data quality improvements. Maintaining continuity of existing time series was also a priority of users of the statistics. These requirements have been reflected in the new questionnaire.

9 The new questionnaire has now been finalised after extensive testing to confirm the content and design aspects (such as question sequencing and flow). Associated interviewer training, field documentation and operational aspects of the data collection have also been developed and tested. Although on a relatively small scale, this testing has verified the effectiveness of the changes.

The statistical impact study and implementation of the new questionnaire

10 The SIS will be conducted from March to July 2000 to confirm that the questionnaire redesign has met the objective of maintaining continuity of core labour force series. It will be the main source of quantitative data available to the ABS to evaluate the statistical impact of the new questionnaire prior to implementation. The SIS will enable the ABS to assess the validity of its expectation that the new questionnaire will not cause a significant break in the core series. For the purposes of the study, a significant break is defined as a change in the employment to population ratio, or the unemployment rate, of 0.4 percentage points or more in either direction, after making adjustment for measurable breaks in series attributed to changes in definition.

The statistical impact study and implementation of the new questionnaire *continued*

11 Subject to the outcome of the SIS, it is planned to phase in the new questionnaire over two months, in March and April 2001. A phased-in implementation will reduce the impact on the estimates of month to month movement due to any short term interviewer learning effects. A second information paper is scheduled for release in February 2001 to notify users of the outcomes of the SIS, to provide more detail about arrangements for implementing the new questionnaire, and to advise details of the changes to LFS publications associated with the implementation of the new questionnaire.

CHANGES TO CORE DATA SERIES

Introduction

12 Four definitional changes affecting core data series will be introduced to enhance the quality of the statistics and better align the survey with current international standards as defined by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). These changes are:

- revised treatment of future starters;
- revised treatment of contributing family workers who are away from work;
- revised treatment of people who are unavailable to start work in the reference week due to temporary illness; and
- revised treatment of persons on unpaid short term leave initiated by the employer.

13 An explanation of these changes and their expected impact is outlined below. While the changes will partially offset each other, it is likely that their net impact will result in a small decrease in the unemployment rate and a slight increase in the employment to population ratio. The core series will be backcast to remove the impact of the more substantial changes.

14 In addition to these definitional changes, one methodological change will be introduced to address a long-standing provider load issue for elderly respondents to the LFS. The new questionnaire will include a new response category for persons aged 65 years and over who volunteer that they are not intending to work again in the future. If such information is provided, the respondent will not be asked any further questions for the current month. The ABS is confident that this change will not perceptibly impact on the data.

Future starters

15 The redesigned questionnaire will more accurately identify people waiting to start a job they have already obtained (future starters). Future starters are considered unemployed because they form part of the pool of currently underutilised and available labour resources. The current LFS definition of unemployment includes those who had actively looked for work and who "were waiting to start a new job within four weeks from the end of the reference week and would have started in the reference week if the job had been available then".

16 ILO guidelines define future starters as people who did not have work in the reference week, and may not have been actively seeking work, but who were waiting to start work they had already obtained and were available to work in the reference week. The guidelines specify that future starters be classified as unemployed and that the precondition of active job search be waived for them. The current LFS definition of future starters is not fully consistent with ILO standards because the active job search condition is not waived in the identification of future starters.

Future starters *continued*

17 To align with the ILO recommendations, the LFS definition of unemployment will be amended to include persons who had not actively looked for work because they were waiting to start a new job within four weeks from the end of the reference week, and who would have started in the reference week if the job had been available then.

Implications

18 As a result of this change, there will be a small increase in the number of people classified as unemployed (and a small decrease in those not in the labour force). This change is not expected to have a statistically significant effect on core data. However, it is possible to isolate the additional future starters in the new questionnaire so the number of people affected by this change will be monitored during the SIS. Further information about the impact of this change will be advised in the second information paper.

Contributing family workers
away from work

19 Contributing family workers are people who usually work without pay in an economic enterprise operated by a related person living in the same household. Currently in the LFS, contributing family workers who are away from work in the reference week are classified as employed. This is counter to ILO guidelines which specify that these people should be classified as either unemployed or not in the labour force, depending on their recent job search activity and availability for work. To align with ILO standards, the current LFS definition of employed persons will be revised to exclude contributing family workers who are away from work.

Implications

20 No longer classifying these contributing family workers who are away from work as employed will reduce the estimated number of employed persons. Mean monthly data for 1990–1997 compiled for the relevant survey questions confirms that this change will have an insignificant impact on core data series. The employment to population ratio may be expected to decrease by approximately 0.01 percentage points, with corresponding increases in the number of persons unemployed and not in the labour force (NILF). Based on mean monthly data for 1990–1997, the unemployment rate may be expected to increase by a maximum 0.02 percentage points.

Unavailable to start work
due to temporary illness

21 The current LFS definition of unemployed persons includes people who are not working, who are actively seeking work, but who are unavailable to start work during the reference week due to temporary illness. However, ILO guidelines recommend that illness be treated similarly to other reasons for not being available to start work, and hence these people should be classified as NILF. To conform with this recommendation, the LFS definition of unemployed persons will be revised to exclude persons unavailable to start work due to temporary illness.

Implications

22 Removing the temporary illness exception will reduce the number of unemployed persons (and increase the number classified as NILF). Historical data indicate that the resulting decrease in the unemployment rate is approximately 0.05 percentage points.

Unavailable to start work
due to temporary illness
continued

23 Since it will no longer be necessary to identify this population for output purposes, questions which currently identify persons unavailable to start work due to temporary illness will be deleted. Therefore, it will not be possible to directly quantify this change once the new questionnaire is implemented. However, sufficient historical data is available to backcast relevant series to ensure their continuity.

Short term unpaid leave
initiated by the employer

24 A change in the treatment of persons absent from work on short-term unpaid leave initiated by the employer will also be introduced to correct an anomaly in the LFS treatment of these persons. This group includes persons who have been stood down without pay for less than 4 weeks because there is insufficient work available or for other unspecified reasons, other than bad weather or plant breakdown. These persons are currently classified in the LFS as unemployed.

25 The anomaly occurs as these workers are treated differently to persons absent from work without pay for less than 4 weeks for *other* reasons. Other reasons for short term absence include personal leave or flex time, bad weather or plant breakdown, and strike or lock out. These people are classified as employed whether or not they are paid. To apply a consistent treatment for all persons on short term unpaid leave, the LFS definitions will be revised to reclassify persons on unpaid short term leave initiated by the employer from unemployed to employed. This approach is consistent with ILO recommendations on formal job attachment.

26 Empirical evidence indicates that the majority of respondents on unpaid leave initiated by their employer in one month will resume their work in the next month. Analysis of the month to month change for persons away from work without pay for less than 4 weeks because of insufficient work (who were classified as unemployed) showed that approximately 63 per cent of these persons had a labour force status of employed in the month following their reported absence due to insufficient work. Under the new treatment, these persons would be consistently classified as employed, removing the volatility introduced by a temporary change in circumstances.

Implications

27 Introduction of this change will reduce the number of unemployed persons and increase the number of employed. Mean monthly data for 1990–1997 indicate that the unemployment rate would be reduced by an average of 0.24 percentage points, with a corresponding increase in employment of about 21,000 people and in the employment to population ratio of approximately 0.16 percentage points. Historical data will provide information necessary to backcast this change to remove its impact on core series.

CHANGES TO NON-CORE DATA SERIES

Introduction

28 As mentioned above, changes to questions collecting non-core data have also been minimised to maintain continuity of the non-core data series. The three changes that are considered most significant in terms of any effect on the survey data are summarised below.

Last job details

29 The only instance where a current data series will no longer be available is in the case of the last full-time job details of unemployed persons. Under the new questionnaire, information about occupation, industry and reasons for ceasing work will relate to an unemployed person's last job, irrespective of whether it was full-time or part-time. This information is currently collected in relation to an unemployed person's last *full-time* job.

30 This change in the scope of the last job details has been implemented to reflect the increasing importance of part-time employment in the labour market. Information on last full-time job is currently published in *Labour Force, Australia* (Cat. No. 6203.0), monthly in Tables 28, 29, 30, and quarterly in Table 52. Under the new questionnaire, last job details will only be collected quarterly. Hence the above tables will be produced only on a quarterly basis.

31 In addition to the above changes, there will be a small change in the job loser/job leaver data series due to a change in the way persons who left a temporary, seasonal or holiday job are treated. Currently, people who left a temporary, seasonal or holiday job specifically to return to study are classified as job leavers. People who left a temporary, seasonal or holiday job, but who did not leave it to return to study, are classified as job losers. Under the new questionnaire, all people who left their last job because it was seasonal or temporary will be classified as job losers. Those who left their job because it was a holiday job or respond specifically that they left to return to studies will be classified as job leavers. This change was motivated by concerns about the quality of data being collected for people who specifically left their job to return to studies, as well as a desire to minimise respondent load.

Status in employment

32 Changes in the structure and wording of questions used to collect status in employment data (employed persons classified by whether they were employers, employees, own account workers or contributing family workers) are likely to have some effect on the responses given, although the broad concepts being measured have not changed. These question changes have been made in order to better cater for a diversity of working arrangements, which have become more common since the current questionnaire was designed.

33 In the current questionnaire only one question is used to obtain status in employment data, and some working arrangements may not be correctly coded because of the limitations of this approach. In the redesigned questionnaire, several questions will be used, making it possible to use a step-by-step approach to obtaining the information. In

Status in employment
continued

addition, a set of response categories, catering for diverse work arrangements, will be provided. These changes have been designed to give respondents a clear choice between types of working arrangements relevant to the characteristics of the current labour market. This is expected to improve the classification to status in employment.

Underemployment

34 The questions collecting underemployment information have been revised to reflect a wider range of situations where people are seeking to work more hours. The current questions focus on people who are seeking another job which offers more hours. The redesigned questions will be more inclusive of other situations, for example, where people are seeking more hours with their current employer, or an extra job. Again, these changes have been motivated by changes in the labour market, such as increased flexibility in working arrangements and an increase in multiple jobholding. Because of this 'broadening of the net', there will be a slight increase in the number of people classified as underemployed.

35 Underemployment data are currently published monthly in *Labour Force, Australia* (Cat. No. 6203.0) in Tables 20 and 21. The frequency of collection of underemployment data will be reduced from monthly to quarterly in the new questionnaire to help offset increased provider load imposed by additional data items.

ADDITIONAL DATA

Introduction

36 The new questionnaire will address some areas of user demand by adding new data items or extending existing data items.

Job tenure

37 A measure of the length of time a person has been in their current employment (less than 12 months, or 12 months or more) will be available. For people who have been in their current employment for less than 12 months, a breakdown in months will also be available. To complement this information, a person's future employment expectations (in 12 months time) will also be measured. These data items will provide an indicator of recent and future potential movements in the labour market, and a broad measure of the extent of short-term employment.

38 Because job tenure details for individuals do not change a great deal from month to month, this information will be asked on a quarterly basis only.

Marginal attachment

39 Users of LFS data have requested more frequent information about people who are marginally attached to the labour force. It is not possible to provide full details of persons marginally attached to the labour force in the monthly LFS, due to timing and cost constraints of the survey and provider load considerations. However, the new questionnaire will measure an important subset of persons with marginal attachment to the labour force, comprising those who were actively seeking work, not available to start work in the reference week, but available to start within 4 weeks of the interview. This data item is currently available from the Persons Not in the Labour Force supplementary survey which is conducted in September each year, along with a complete measure of people who are marginally attached to the labour force.

Underemployment

40 The current LFS defines two categories when measuring underemployment:

- part-time workers wanting more hours of work; and
- full-time workers who worked less than 35 hours in the reference week for economic reasons (stood down or insufficient work).

41 Currently, the first category comprises persons who worked part time in the reference week and who usually work part time. Monthly data are available for the number of part-time workers wanting to work more hours, and for part-time workers wanting to work more hours who had actively sought full-time work in the four weeks to the end of the reference week.

42 In the new questionnaire, part-time workers who are actively seeking more hours of work will also be asked whether they were available to start working additional hours in the reference week. This will enable an additional measure of underemployment to be introduced which has criteria which align with the criteria for determining unemployment (that is, actively looking for work and available for work in the reference week). The current measures of underemployment will continue to be available.

Underemployment <i>continued</i>	<p>43 Underemployment information is not currently available for people who worked full time during the reference week but who usually work part time. Although this population is small, the new questionnaire will include them in underemployment estimates.</p>
Hours worked	<p>44 The current full-time/part-time series is based on information about hours worked in the reference week and about usual hours. That is, full-time workers are defined as those who worked full time in the reference week or who usually work full time. This series will continue to be available on a monthly basis.</p> <p>45 The new questionnaire will also measure usual hours per se, providing more comprehensive data than are currently available. For example, the new questionnaire will enable the identification of people who worked full time in the reference week but who usually work part time.</p>
Multiple jobholders	<p>46 For multiple jobholders, hours worked in their main job in the reference week will be available, in addition to total hours worked in all jobs. This will mean hours worked data for multiple jobholders will correspond fully with occupation, industry and status in employment data for multiple jobholders, which currently relate to the main job only.</p>
Duration of unemployment	<p>47 Duration of unemployment is currently defined in the LFS as the time from when a person began looking for work to the end of the reference week; or the time since a person last worked full time for two weeks or more, whichever is the shorter period. The second criterion is contrary to ILO guidelines which refer to the period since a person last worked, and do not specifically exclude part-time work. To align with ILO guidelines, the reference to the period since a person last worked will be revised to reflect the period since a person last worked in any job for two weeks or more, rather than just a full-time job.</p> <p>48 One consequence of this definitional change will be a decrease in the number of long term unemployed (that is, those unemployed persons whose duration of unemployment is 52 weeks or more). Data for the period 1997–1999 indicate that an average of about 23,000 persons per month would be reclassified from long term to short term unemployed. This represents a fall of approximately 3.1 percentage points in the proportion of unemployed who are long term unemployed. The existing measure of duration of unemployment will continue to be available, and the new measure will be available as an historical time series.</p> <p>49 Currently in the LFS, a detailed breakdown of duration of unemployment (in weeks) is available only for persons who last worked less than two years ago. With the new questionnaire, duration of unemployment (in months) will also be available for those who last worked between two and five years ago.</p>

THE LFS DURING THE SIS

Introduction

50 As previously mentioned, the SIS will be conducted from March to July 2000. During this time, one eighth of the live LFS sample will be enumerated using the redesigned questionnaire. LFS data enumerated on the redesigned questionnaire will be combined with the remaining seven eighths sample data enumerated on the current questionnaire, to calculate LFS estimates for publication. To achieve this, the new questionnaire will be mapped to the current questionnaire at the question level.

51 The decision to proceed with this approach was made after thorough investigations determined that the data could be combined with little disruption to published output during the SIS. Many of the questions in the new questionnaire are essentially unchanged from the current questionnaire and a close question match is possible. In a small number of cases, a question match is not possible due to changes in the information collected or the frequency of collection. In these circumstances, some imputation or minor changes to the publication will be necessary to accommodate the SIS as described in paragraphs 52–57 below. However, users of labour force statistics are assured that the SIS will not have a perceptible impact on core LFS estimates.

Imputed question responses during the SIS

52 Questions requiring imputation relate specifically to the identification of two small population groups:

- persons absent from work on short term unpaid leave initiated by the employer; and
- persons unavailable to start work due to temporary illness.

53 Question responses for these groups will be imputed on the basis of historical distributions. Only a small number of people are classified to these population groups each month, and only one eighth of the sample will be enumerated using the new questionnaire. Therefore, the extent of imputation during the SIS will be minimal and will not have a perceptible impact on the final estimates.

Publication changes

54 The collection frequency of two non-core series will be reduced from monthly to quarterly in the new questionnaire:

- underemployment data; and
- last job details of unemployed persons (occupation, industry and reasons for leaving)

55 It is not possible to accurately impute these data items during the SIS for the one eighth of the population enumerated on the new questionnaire. It has therefore been decided to commence publishing these estimates quarterly after February 2000 (that is, in February, May, August and November each year, from February 2000). In the transitional period, until the new questionnaire is implemented, the existing series will continue to be available on a monthly basis on request, although estimates will be based on a reduced seven eighths sample during the SIS.

56 The following tables, currently published monthly in *Labour Force, Australia* (6203.0), will be published quarterly after February 2000:

Underemployed series

- Table 20. 'Part-time workers: Whether preferred to work more hours, by age'
- Table 21. 'Part-time workers: Whether preferred to work more hours, by hours worked.'

Last full-time job details of unemployed persons

- Table 28. 'Unemployed persons: Industry and occupation of last full-time job and duration of unemployment'
- Table 29. 'Unemployed persons: Reason for leaving last full-time job'
- Table 30. 'Unemployed persons who had worked full time for two weeks or more in the last two years: reason for ceasing last full-time job, industry and occupation of last full-time job and age'.

57 Finally, last job details (occupation, industry and reasons for leaving) of unemployed persons collected on the new questionnaire will be in reference to the person's last job, irrespective of whether it was a full-time or part-time job. In a majority of cases, the last job details will refer to a full-time job. However, in a small number of cases, the last job details will be in reference to a part-time job. During the SIS, details of that part-time job will be used as a proxy for the last full-time job details for those unemployed persons enumerated on the new questionnaire only. This will affect tables 28, 29 and 30 and also Table 52 'Unemployment rates: Industry and occupation of last full-time job', in the May 2000 issue of 6203.0.

FURTHER INFORMATION

58 The LFS publications will be revised to reflect the additional data items available and changes to existing data items when the new questionnaire is fully implemented (that is, in April 2001). Prior to this, the outcomes of the SIS and full details of the implementation strategy will be provided in a second information paper scheduled for release in February 2001: *Implementing the Redesigned Labour Force Survey Questionnaire* (6295.0).

59 For further information relating to the redesign of the Labour Force Survey questionnaire, please contact:

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